

Testimony of Steve White
SB152
March 12, 2007

Dear Chairman Jore and Members of the House Education Committee,

Please accept this letter, with attachments, into record regarding my opposition to SB152.

I regret that I was unable to attend the important hearing on SB152 to personally testify. I intended to take personal time to attend the hearing, but my fiduciary duties as Gallatin County Commissioner prevented me (Belgrade Fire District election canvass – 3/12 3PM).

Objections to SB152

SB152 is an 'omnibus' bill that modifies Montana statute adversely, as well as demands an immense amount of additional tax money from citizens across the state. Below are the specific parts of the bill that I oppose.

SB152 – Page 1, lines 27-30 (Loan Forgiveness)

Why should a single segment of college graduates be granted the forgiveness of their repayment obligations? There are many students going to school today that would be discriminated against with this new section of law. But a bigger question is: "Why should any student be provided forgiveness of their student loans?"

My son graduated from high school in 2000, and attended MSU-Bozeman. Even though we lived close to MSU (allowing him to live cheaply at home), he chose to move to his own apartment close to campus as a Junior. He worked 20 hours a week during the school year, and full time in the summer to pay for his education and lodging. My wife and I helped him with books, but he did the rest. **Our son worked hard to earn scholarships and ended up graduating from MSU in Business/Finance in 2004 with a 3.95 GPA and NO STUDENT LOANS.** He is now married and owns his own internet development business in Bozeman (also debt-free).

The point is that there is already a way for a student to avoid education debt: scholarships and outside employment. Why should any student receive special consideration for college expenses when there are many options available?

SB152 – Page 1, lines 13-15 (Fulltime kindergarten)

A major part of the fiscal note of SB152 relates directly to the implementation of fulltime kindergarten. In the research that I have done on employing a full day of classroom activity to a 6 year old, I have seen little evidence to support the benefit of it. In fact there are many in the education and child development field, who make the case that all day programs do more harm than good.

Our state's taxpayers cannot afford this additional burden. The fiscal note demonstrates the extreme amount of added tax burden that this would add. And even in our local area of Bozeman, the school districts are expressing deep concern over the added costs, and lack of facilities. (attached newspaper articles)

Recently the Bozeman taxpayers voted over \$50M for a new high school and middle school. And before the end of the year, we will be asked for more money for two more elementary schools. On top of this we are struggling with a possible bond issue for a new detention center. **Adding fulltime kindergarten to our existing demands will 'break the camel's back'.**

SB152 – Pages 29-33 (Governor's scholarship program)

Last session Rep Branae introduced HB435. In the 2005 session I represented the Montana Coalition of Home Educators (MCHE) as their Legislative Liaison. MCHE opposed the original version of HB435, because it was designed to only apply to public school students. We felt that any student should be able to compete for scholarship opportunity.

In the process, I met with Lt Gov Bohlinger's staff (Will Hammerquist) regarding this issue. They made some changes, but still over half the slots available were only to public school students. That was the best we could do.

SB152, Page 30, lines 8-9, strikes the definition of 'at-large student'. This was a part of HB435 that was utilized to address non-accredited non-public schools. That was an important compromise in the passage of HB435.

Also, SB152 repeals all of the eligibility sections of law that were added in HB435 (Page 33, lines 10-11).

I believe that the ultimate goal of this part of SB152 is to destroy all non-public school students' opportunity provided in last session's HB435

scholarship bill, with the new language (as well as repealers). This is unfair to many deserving graduating students.

Conclusion

SB152 represents an expensive change to Montana law. The fiscal note demonstrates the financial demands that not only raises our taxes, but also puts another huge burden on local school districts and their growth planning.

And for the non-public students in Montana, SB152 reverses all the agreement and compromise that was achieved in the 2005 session regarding scholarship opportunities. The proponents will likely try and make the case that non-public students can still apply for scholarships, but this bill clearly strikes all the language of last session's bill that provided access to some of the scholarship slots.

Thank you for your consideration of my provided testimony. Please vote against the passage of SB152.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Greg Whelan", is written below the text.



Enrollment sparks talk of new elementary school

By GAIL SCHONTZLER Chronicle Staff Writer

Bozeman's elementary and middle schools have 80 more students than last year, prompting officials to start talking about when and where the district will need to build another elementary school.

At the same time, an unexpected drop in Bozeman's high school enrollment — down 56 students from last fall — shows that it will likely be another decade before a second high school is needed. Total K-12 enrollment is 5,356, up 24 from last year. Superintendent Mike Redburn said Wednesday that the latest count demonstrates how volatile and hard to predict enrollment can be. When kindergarten enrollment jumped by 33 students three years ago, people wondered whether that was a fluke or a trend, Redburn said. Since then, kindergarten numbers have kept growing — up 20 last year and up another 41 this year. That's clearly a trend, Redburn said, and it's time to start talking about where to build a new elementary school and what the timeline should be.

"The need is there, and we know it's going to come," he said.

Bozeman's six elementary schools have added five half-time kindergarten classes and two firstgrade classes in the past two years, and converted computer rooms to classrooms.

The next step may be to convert music rooms to regular classrooms or add portable classrooms, Marilyn King, assistant superintendent for instruction, said last summer.

The high school district, which has larger boundaries and a separate budget, saw enrollment increase by 115 two years ago and by 35 last year. This year it suddenly dropped by 56 students.

Redburn said no one knows why that happened, but it proves that the housing boom doesn't always mean more students showing up at school.

The downside of dropping enrollment is that it could cost the high school budget about \$170,000 next year, unless the Legislature makes changes in statewide school funding, said Steve Johnson, assistant superintendent for business.

The drop in high school enrollment seems like an anomaly, Redburn said, rather than a continuing trend. It doesn't mean that the \$30 million renovation of Bozeman High School isn't needed, he said.

But people who have been predicting that the high school will be full by the time the renovation is completed probably don't need to worry.

Johnson, who tracks enrollment trends and hospital birth rates, said the renovated high school is planned to hold 2,000 to 2,400 students before a second high school is needed.

His prediction is that the high school enrollment won't reach 2,400 until the year 2016.

This fall's high school enrollment is 1,936 students, including 85 at the Bridger alternative program (down 13 from last year) and 1,841 at the main high school (down 44).

Chief Joseph Middle School has 532 students (down 25) and Sacajawea Middle school has 657 (up 43).

Of the two newest elementary schools, Morning Star has 550 students (up 39) and Emily Dickinson has 498 (up 20). Of the older schools, Whittier has 257 (up 10), Hawthorne has 300 (down eight), Longfellow has 312 (up eight), and Irving has 304 (down three).

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Bozeman schools keep eye on legislative session

By GAIL SCHONTZLER Chronicle Staff Writer

Montana's public schools are still underfunded and need more from the 2007 Legislature than just money to keep up with inflation, says Bozeman's school superintendent.

The last Legislature made good progress toward meeting a state Supreme Court mandate to adequately fund quality schools, but more still needs to be done, Superintendent Mike Redburn said Friday.

That's the biggest concern of the Bozeman schools as the 2007 Legislature opens, he said.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer said the day before, during a stop in Bozeman, that public schools had fared well in the 2005 regular and 2006 special sessions of the Legislature, and his 2009 budget would spend 6 percent more on schools.

Schweitzer dismissed the possibility that the schools coalition may drag the state back into court, saying the public is tired of governments suing government.

Redburn agreed that the Legislature had made significant progress, and added he strongly supports the governor's proposal to increase funding per student and for special education to keep up with inflation. But he disagreed that the state has met its obligation. "If all we do is fund inflation, we're saying the job is done, and that's not the case," Redburn said.

The Montana Quality Education Coalition, which supported the lawsuit and to which the Bozeman School District belongs, will soon release a report on how much the state still needs to provide to schools, he said.

The 2005 Legislature defined a quality education, and then laid out the components to meet that definition — things like closing the achievement gap for American Indian students, helping at-risk and gifted students, and covering classroom costs, Redburn said.

The problem, he added, is there isn't enough money to pay for what those things actually cost.

"That's the piece they haven't achieved yet," Redburn said.

Another key issue for Bozeman schools will be the Big Sky community's bill to break from the Bozeman High School district and form its own high school. Bozeman school trustees have informally agreed to support the effort if the Legislature softens the blow to Bozeman — the loss of 12.9 percent of its high school tax base, nearly \$900,000 a year. from page A3

With other parts of the state envying Bozeman's economic boom, that will be a tough sell in the Legislature, according to some lawmakers.

"You can look at Bozeman and say it's a wealthy community," Redburn responded. "That does not translate into a wealthy school district.

"The growth you see in Bozeman and the economic vitality you see in Bozeman has very little to do with school funding," he said. "They don't pay more because the cost of living is high, so that teachers can afford to live in Bozeman."

The governor's budget also proposes money for all-day kindergarten at school districts that want it.

Redburn said while Bozeman educators strongly support allday, every-day kindergarten, schools here don't have enough classrooms to hold all-day kindergarten and won't have the space even if a new elementary school is built.

It doesn't make sense to expand school programs, he said, when the state "isn't adequately funding the programs it already has."

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"If all we do is fund inflation, we're saying the job is done, and that's not the case."

— Bozeman Superintendent Mike Redburn

